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TAGS: PREL MARR PGOV NATO PINS EZ XG

SUBJECT: CZECH REPUBLIC MISSILE DEFENSE: CONCERNS ABOUT RUSSIANS ADDRESSED; LOOKING AHEAD TO TIMELINE AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS

REF: PRAGUE 1174

Classified By: DCM Mary Thompson-Jones for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Visits to Prague of USD(P) Eric Edelman and U/S Rood, together with clear Czech statements following a government meeting on November 6, appear to have put to rest Czech concerns about possible Russian troops at the proposed missile defense radar site (reftel). The Czechs told Edelman and Rood that strong public sensitivities, and close political balance, require that both sides work to minimize any surprises or missteps in public communication. But both within government and on the public record it is clear that no USG invitation has been given to place Russian troops on Czech soil. Discussions with USD(P) Edelman on November 6, and with the two negotiating teams in Prague this week and last, touched on several other important areas going forward: the Czech calendar for ratification, the importance of the Bucharest NATO Summit, and Czech interest in demonstrating progress on economic cooperation. All these issues will likely be on the agenda of Deputy PM Sasha Vondra when he visits Washington November 14-15. End summary.

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After the firestorm  
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¶2. (C) The press firestorm that followed Secretary Gates' brief mention of possible Russian inspections of the planned MD radar site in the Czech Republic (reftel) did not prove long lasting. The story dropped from the front pages after the October 27-28 weekend. But post continued to hear questions and concerns about this for several days. The Ambassador took every opportunity to reinforce the message Secretary Gates was trying to make -- but was missed by most

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press commentators, and therefore by most Czechs -- that there was no concrete offer for a Russian presence at the radar site, and there would not be without coordination with the Czech government. Among the more interesting discussions in the past ten days:

-- Foreign Minister Schwarzenberg told the Ambassador October 28 that he was "surprised and disappointed" by the Gates "announcement." He was even stronger with a visiting American that same weekend, complaining that the U.S. "announcement" about the Russian invitation to the radar site "had been made with no prior warning" to the GOCR, which was "an embarrassment to him."

-- Senior MFA officials, meeting with the embassy MD team on October 29, also made reference to the alleged "announcement" and specifically drew attention to the Secretary's use of the word "presence" in his press comments, recommending that any future public references refer only to possible inspections.

More broadly, MFA officials encouraged the USG to make sure that any confidence building or transparency measures were reciprocal. (In private comments, another MFA official, in reference to Russia's rejection of the USG proposals, stated plainly that "the Russians have won" and urged the USG not to provide any further concessions to the GOR.)

-- A group of parliamentarians, during lunch with the Ambassador on October 30, were more muted but stressed the Czech public's intense sensitivity to Russian troops. The MPs, several of whom had met with Secretary Gates during his visit, acknowledged that the Secretary had been clear in his statements with them, and that the problem was press exaggeration of the issue, combined with the lack of a clear government explanation.

-- During a visit to the Brdy region on October 31, Ambassador met with several local mayors and asked their reaction. All stated that Russian troops would be a concern, and accepted Ambassador's assurances that no deals were being struck without Czech participation. (In further discussions, these mayors made clear that the concern of local residents is less with the question of the nationality of the soldiers, but the fact that any troops based at Brdy -- whether Russian, German, or Czech -- have been poor neighbors who do not interact well with local residents.)

¶3. (C) Several events in early November helped to bring this issue to what we hope is closure.

-- The Czech National Security Council met morning of November 6. President Klaus issued a clear statement following the meeting that "there would be no Russian troops permanently based at the radar." Klaus went on to say that "since the beginning there has been a very technical discussion on specific, occasional, and random monitoring;

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there was no talk of deploying Russian troops on Czech soil."

Klaus termed these reports media fabrications. This clear statement went a long way towards repairing the damage done by PM Topolanek's "no comment" when asked about the Russian question at the press conference with Secretary Gates.

-- USD(P) Edelman's visit to Prague on November 6 (discussed further below) resulted in extensive press, including an interview under the headline "There was no talk of a Russian presence."

-- U/S Rood, in a press conference with Deputy FM Pojar at the conclusion of negotiations on the Ballistic Missile Defense Agreement (details septel), stressed that the two sides had agreed that the text would make explicit that no third party representatives would have access to the proposed radar site without the explicit approval of both parties.

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USD(P) Edelman in Prague  
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¶4. (C) USD(P) Eric Edelman's brief visit to Prague on November 6 (arranged at short notice following the cancellation of a planned trip to Pakistan) featured extensive press and several important meetings.

¶5. (C) Edelman joined U/S Rood and Deputy FM Pojar for lunch during a break in the BMDA negotiations. Deputy DefMin Bartak and Czech MD Communications Coordinator Klvana, along with other MFA staff, joined the lunch. While Pojar and the subject of MD dominated the discussion, the focus was more on NATO and the Bucharest Summit than internal Czech developments. Pojar indicated that he was generally pleased with the (albeit slow) progress of the MD negotiations and that he thought the "Russian presence" uproar was already behind them. He said that the topics of Kosovo and NATO missile defense had dominated the agenda of the Czech

Security Council's morning meeting. Pojar emphasized that some "courageous wording" on MD at the Bucharest Summit would be critical to the parliamentary debate of U.S.-Czech agreements. With regards to the vote in Parliament, Pojar expressed optimism that the Czech Government would secure "one hundred and one" votes in the 200 seat chamber; Pojar's opinion was that the Social Democrats will not vote in favor, but that Ondrej Liska (a leader in the Green Party) would act "responsibly."

¶6. (C) The entire Czech team expressed exasperation at the attitude of their Norwegian and German counterparts towards MD, but were less pessimistic regarding their French colleagues. Despite recent rumblings out of the Government and Ministry of Defense in Bratislava, Pojar did not think that the Slovaks would be a problem at Bucharest, but was wary of the Greeks. CFE and the Russians also came up during the discussion, with MFA staff urging the U.S. to talk more to the Baltic states and to get the Alliance discussion refocused from "how to keep the Russians in" to "what to do when they leave." (Note: DepDefMin Bartak, who was almost silent during the lunch, spoke with USDP prior to Pojar's arrival. Bartak recently attended the Iraqi Coalition Conference in Bahrain, where he had bilateral meetings with ADM Fallon and Gen Petraeus. Referring to these bilaterals, Bartak asked USDP when the Czechs might expect a deployment request from the U.S. for their Special Operations Forces in support of OEF.)

¶7. (C) Edelman met with Jan Vidim (ODS), Chairman of the Defense Committee in the Chamber of Deputies. Also participating were two CSSD deputies: Antonin Seda and Vaclav Klucka. They had an excellent exchange, focused solely on MD. Edelman kicked off the meeting with an overview of the MD system, as well as the strategic objectives underpinning the system and guiding our discussions with Russia. Vidim, who is a strong supporter of the radar, underscored the Czech public's skepticism toward the radar proposal and made two points in this regard: 1) the U.S. and the Czech sides had to be very careful on topics like Russian inspections in light of historic sensitivities; and 2) a link with NATO, and especially a strong statement from the Bucharest summit, would go a long way toward preparing the ground for an eventual passage of the MD agreements in the Czech parliament.

¶8. (C) The opposition deputies, Seda and Klucka, have been thoughtful and reasonable in prior radar discussions, and both would probably support the MD agreements in the parliamentary vote, if CSSD Chairman Paroubek decided not to enforce party discipline. Klucka, for example, was at pains to clarify that his and Seda's position on MD was "careful,"

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rather than negative. He also suggested -- and possibly inadvertently took a swipe at Paroubek and his preoccupation with the extent of the threat from Iran -- that if more information were offered to the public regarding the Iranian threat, Czech politicians would not be able to use it as a pretext for opposing the radar. Seda followed up on Vidim's point on NATO by stating that "CSSD wants to see MD incorporated into NATO." He also asked about the extent of the threat and whether NATO's security indivisibility would be threatened by the MD system, since not all NATO countries would be covered by the MD umbrella.

¶9. (C) Edelman met with Deputy PM Sasha Vondra, a former foreign minister and former Czech Ambassador in Washington, who has been closely involved in the MD debate from the start. Opening with the Russian troops question, Vondra echoed some of the comments heard earlier from ForMin Schwarzenberg about need for coordination before any "announcements" are made to the media on sensitive topics, stressing that domestic political sensitivities and the tight political situation made it imperative that communication be flawless. Vondra inquired about our timeline to reach

agreement on MD. Edelman noted that this "matters to the President" and that the USG is looking to proceed with all due speed. Edelman also commented that the negotiations are proceeding steadily and that early next year could be a reasonable target date. Vondra concurred that it was important to get things done prior to the NATO Summit and outlined very specific events and target dates that the Czechs would like to meet. One priority is to have the agreements signed and ratified well in advance of the November 2008 regional election. According to Vondra, the GOCR would like to see the texts ready for PM Topolanek and President Bush to sign during Topolanek's planned visit to Washington in February/March 2008: the Czechs see this as an opportunity for significant media attention which will provide momentum leading into the NATO Summit and Czech ratification, which Vondra expects to see happen before the summer recess. As a side note on the Summit, Vondra also touched upon support within the alliance and stated that more pressure needed to be applied to the Germans and the Norwegians to get them to be more cooperative on MD.

¶10. (SBU) Media reporting following the Edelman visit and the conclusion of the latest round of BMDA negotiations was straightforward, highlighting agreement on the presence of a Czech military commander at the proposed radar facility and MD-related US installations. Many in the press noted the remark made by Deputy FM Pojar that the CR will not charge the USG any rent for the radar (note that, as discussed septel, this issue is not yet closed in the talks). The story got prominent placement on Czech Television, Czech Radio, the Czech News Agency, three daily newspapers and all online servers. Commercial TV station NOVA and the leading daily, "Mlada Fronta Dnes," however, did not cover the Rood/Edelman/Pojar press conference.

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Vondra visit to Washington  
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¶11. (C) Deputy PM Vondra will visit Washington for consultations November 15-16. While Vondra's current portfolio is EU affairs, he has long been involved in the MD debate. Vondra will be accompanied in Washington by two of the MFA's senior staff handling MD (Veronika Kucynova-Smigolova, Director of Security Policy, and Katerina Weissova, communications advisor), giving an indication of his priorities for his meetings. We understand that Vondra's program is not yet firm, but he is seeking meetings at State, DOD (including MDA), and Commerce.

¶12. (C) We expect that one of Vondra's main interests will be discussing potential economic benefits from the radar. We are hearing senior GOCR officials talk with greater frequency and passion about economic benefits. For instance, PM Topolanek asked several recent CODELs for help ensuring that the MD effort led to some tangible improvement in Czech R&D capabilities. During the two rounds of negotiations over the past two weeks, negotiators from MFA and MOD both consistently focused on the importance of demonstrating economic benefits as part of the government effort to win eventual approval of the MD agreements in the divided parliament. The GOCR has specifically asked the MDA for a program to bring Czech suppliers together with MDA and its major contractors; MDA responded positively and plans a "BMD Seminar" in January (MDA provided the Czechs with preliminary thoughts on such a seminar on November 6). This also explains the Czech focus on a BMD Framework Agreement with MDA, and their desire to pinpoint tangible benefits that will

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derive from such an agreement (MDA comments on this provided November 2, State 152254). Other avenues being explored to meet Czech requirements include a contracting training seminar and, eventually, a reciprocal procurement agreement.

¶13. (C) Comment: MD will be only one of many things on

Vondra's mind. The coming months bring many international questions that will require careful maneuvering in the divided parliament. MD is the most complicated and sensitive. Others include the 2008 foreign deployments bill (including a new PRT in Afghanistan), the EU reform treaty, and the possible recognition of an independent Kosovo (while not requiring a vote in Parliament, it will be controversial). Domestic issues -- notably the vote on a relatively tight budget next month and the February presidential election -- are also in the mix. And there is the issue of energy security, one that is personally important to both Vondra and PM Topolanek, but which risks dividing the coalition because of the Greens' sensitivity to increasing nuclear power. Many deals will need to be made in order to both advance the Topolanek government's policy objectives and keep the coalition intact. Vondra will have these calculations in mind as he makes the rounds in Washington. End comment.

¶14. (U) U/S Edelman has cleared this cable.  
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